



*THE LURE OF THE SPINDLE:  
THE PORTUGUESE IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY LOWELL*

## Arrival

Portugal and its Atlantic Islands had engaged in trade with North America since the colonial era. Portuguese immigration to Massachusetts was originally triggered by the whaling industry. By 1900, the New England textile industry needed more workers. In response, Portuguese men and women came to New Bedford, Fall River, and Lowell, Massachusetts. They arrived by new transatlantic steamship lines, the White Star and the Fabre. Their ships stopped at Madeira and the Azores, offering third class passage to Boston. By 1920, Lowell's population was almost 115,000 with 38,000 immigrants of which 1,700 were Portuguese.

## Work

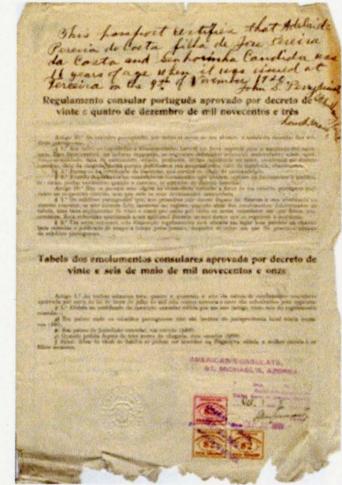
In the 1900s, Lowell's textile mills provided steady work for the Portuguese immigrants. At work, the Portuguese learned English, as well as American culture and traditions. The Portuguese still maintained there sense of *comunidade*, which was most evident during the textile strikes of 1903 and 1912. As members of the I.W.W. Local #436, they fully participated union organizing. They also raised money from within their community to provide support and aid to striking Portuguese workers.

Businesses and shops included: Agencia de Livros Alvorada bookstore; Silva & Barreiro's fish market; A.C. Picano's barbershop; Joao Rocha's grocery store; Jose Ferreira's shoe shop; Lisbon Barber Shop; and Antonio Silva's cord-wood delivery service. In the Back Central neighborhood, the Portuguese were creating an oasis of the familiar and known.

## Comunidade

There Portuguese in Lowell were mostly from Madeira and the Azores, especially Terceira and Graciosa. They settled in "Back Central," "Chapel Hill," or the City Hall district. Their homes ranged from triple-decker tenements to single-family cottages. A trip through a Portuguese neighborhood would reveal lush well-tended gardens and grape arbors reminiscent of those grown in back in Portugal. These gardens not only provided fresh vegetables and flowers, they offered a welcomed respite from the hot and noisy textile mills.

From 1919 to 1922, in *A Alvorada Diária* (later *Diário de Notícias*), the Portuguese language daily newspaper, there was a regular column about the Portuguese in Lowell, titled "Ecos de Lowell." The entries of "Ecos de Lowell" provide a wealth of information about the cultural, social, and religious activities of the community in Lowell. The articles offered a glimpse into the local happenings, clubs, and businesses.



## Church

In January of 1901, representatives of the nearly 900 Portuguese living in Lowell travelled to East Cambridge to meet with Reverend Anthony J. Pimental to request help form a mission in Lowell. In May 1901, Saint Anthony's Church opened in a former Methodist Church. Reverend Joaquim V. Rosa, from the island of Pico (Azores), was its the first Pastor. The congregation quickly outgrew the first building and a new church was built on Central Street in 1907, where it still stands today.

In 1911, Father Rosa returned home to Pico and was replaced by Bishop Henry Joseph da Silva. It was unusual for a parish church to have a Bishop. In 1908, Bishop da Silva was in Fall River when his cousin Dom Carlos and nephew Dom Luis Filipe were assassinated. He decided for his own safety not return to Portugal and came to serve the new Portuguese community in Lowell. Many of the Portuguese immigration documents were translate into English by Bishop da Silva.

Saint Anthony's Church became the center of the community. It provided a familiar and safe place for religious and social activities. One of the most important Portuguese religious events is the Festa do Espírito Santo (Feast of the Holy Ghost). This celebration, along with its colorful procession, still takes place every spring and is coordinated by the Holy Ghost Society.

## Recreation

Members of the Portuguese community enjoyed both formal and informal gatherings with family and friends. An evening might find male neighbors or family members joining in on a friendly game of dominoes or cards while sharing some homemade wine. Some of the more formal community events took place at Saint Anthony Parish hall.

There were several Portuguese musical groups, the União Portuguesa marching band was one of the most popular. They often played at official functions and for special occasions. Another was the Portuguese Orquestra of the Funchalense Club e Musica. Amateur theater groups often performed at Lowell's Colonial Theater, including Club Dramático Funchalense, Club Dramático Continental, and Centro Dramático Portugal. Social clubs, associations, and societies were very popular among both men and women.

In the summer, there were fireworks at the South Common. Expanded trolley lines went to area lakes and parks including Lakeview Park in Dracut and Canobie Lake Park in Salem, NH. Portuguese families would travel to these parks for picnicking, boating, swimming, and carnival rides.



## **Education**

The Massachusetts legislature passed compulsory education laws, which required children to attend school until the age of 14. These laws, along with the minimum age labor laws, affected everyone in Massachusetts, including immigrants. Like today, young Portuguese immigrants were required to provide “proof-of-age” documents to the Lowell School Department. These documents determined whether they would remain in school or would go to work. Hundreds of these documents survived and were the inspiration for this exhibit. Work did not necessarily mean the end of education. The Lowell School Department taught English to men and women working at the Merrimack Mills, Massachusetts Mills, and Boott Cotton Mills. The Green School and the Bartlett also offered English language instruction in the early evening.

## **Americanization / Naturalization**

The Portuguese, as other immigrants to Lowell, faced the challenge of cultural change. There were local efforts to help in this adjustment including classes. As early as 1914, the Extension Committee of the Lowell YWCA began teaching English language classes and home-making skills to recent immigrant women. Educational efforts expanded with the formation of the International Institute of Lowell. In addition to teaching, the Institute provided support and referral services for naturalization, interpretation, legal, and medical needs.

By WWI, some chose to serve the United States through military service. This also proved true for WWII. By the mid-20th Century, the second and third generations of Portuguese Americans successfully began moving outside of the industrial workforce and into positions within the civil service, police and fire departments, medicine and nursing, and the law.

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